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ABSTRACT

Demographic trends indicate that the American family has changed in significant ways during the past several decades. Specifically, less parental supervision is occurring, and this basic phenomenon is placing children at greater risk of succumbing to the negative influences in the social environment. Educators must reach out to large numbers of at-risk children and their families and embrace them as equal partners in their education. Demonstrating genuine love and caring and building substantial trust help the key players develop a sense of community that deliberately and consistently works toward creating conditions for successful learning. Five programs can improve relationships between caring adults and children's literacy learning: enhancement programs, the Literacy Corps Program, the Parent-Child Learning Project, the Talk-to-a-Literacy-Learner Program, and efforts to support the education of homeless families. Although real commitment to improving the overall culture of communities takes time, it also provides all the key players with humanistic and substantive benefits that will last a lifetime.(Contains 35 references.) (RS)

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Improving Students' Literacy Learning through Caring Relationships with Adults

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During the past several decades, demographic trends clearly indicate that the American family has changed in significant ways. These trends include single-parent households, two working parents, remarried families, same-sex marriages, grandparents serving as parents, and adoptive and foster parents rearing children. Exacerbating such changes in family structures are increasing economic pressures, which have caused a substantial number of adults to seek employment. Many students therefore return home each afternoon with minimal adult supervision. At the least, they become involved with too much television viewing, too much socializing, and too much experimenting. Although these activities are meaningful and constructive when they are done in moderation, excessive indulgence can result in unproductive behavior and negative habits.

Compounding these difficulties is the socially toxic environment in which children are being reared. Garbarino (1995,1997) defines the term **socially toxic environment** as the social world of children becoming poisonous to their overall development. The elements of social toxicity include violence, poverty, and a variety of other economic stresses on families. Specifically, alienation, nastiness, depression, and paranoia are among the pollutants that undermine families and communities. Certainly, these socially disruptive forces are responsible for contaminating the environment, imposing serious threats on children, and making children extremely vulnerable.

> High on the list is the departure of adults from the lives of kids--and some studies report a 50 percent decrease over the past 30 years in the amount of time parents are spending with kids in constructive activities. The lack of adult supervision and time spent doing constructive, cooperative activities compounds the effects of other negative influences in the social environment of kids. Kids "home alone" are more vulnerable to every cultural poison they encounter than are children backed up by adults. (Garbarino, 1997, p. 14)

Undoubtedly, changes in the environment are causing changes in family values.

Elkind (1994, 1996, 1998) also believes that societal changes place substantial stress on children and families. In his view, children are expected to competently deal with a wide variety of experiences and problems, and this taxing context can result in behavior symptomatic of stress. In conversations with teachers across the United States, Elkind receives consistent feedback that more children are demonstrating agression and hostility on school playgrounds, are exhibiting learning difficulities, and are manifesting depression. Not surprisingly, each year a large number of young people become involved with drug and alcohol abuse and either commit or attempt suicide. According to Elkind, these self-destructive behaviors represent young people's reactions to stress, and an important way of responding to this problem is to meet the real needs of children and teenagers. These needs include love and care, adult supervision and guidance, space for activities, age-appropriate curricula, and important connections to parents and society. Demonstrating that we genuinely care about young people increases the chances that they not only will learn more effectively but also will care about other people.

Supporting this perspective is Maeroff's (1998a, 1998b) work, which concerns the important roles of caring adults. While focusing on the needs of economically disadvantaged children, Maeroff suggests four ways of building support for needy students: (1) Providing them with a **sense of connectedness** helps them to be successful because they gain a feeling of belonging to an academic enterprise, and they develop support systems that help them navigate around obstacles. Connectedness is strengthened when schools establish bonds with the community, neighborhood, and home. (2) Promoting children's and adolescents' **sense of well-being** usually involves the availability of a wide range of services and activities, including medical, dental, psychological, tutorial, mentoring, and after-school recreation. These and other sources are necessary for enhancing the well-being of students living

in impoverished neighborhoods. (3) Building a **sense of academic initiative** is both an essential support system and a formidable challenge, especially in neighborhoods where academic achievement seems unrelated to young people's lifestyles. All the key players must therefore work cooperatively to combat the undermining of scholastic achievement. Specifically, students benefit from a variety of factors, including high expectations, self-discipline related to good study habits, persistence, resilience, and enticing instructional lessons. (4) Undergirding academic achievement with a **sense of knowing** helps establish a sturdy foundation for achieving further intellectual outcomes. "Those who know have a firmer basis for knowing more" (Maeroff, 1998b, p. 431). Thus, providing more time for teaching and learning beyond the regular school schedule and ensuring that this extended schedule is offered in safe and productive environments increase the chances that disadvantaged students will develop a better sense of knowing. These four considerations support Coleman's (1988) definition of "social capital" because they shadow the elements that strong families provide for their children's education, and they recognize the importance of the "big picture" in helping young people in impoverished settings to focus on academic learning.

Interestingly, this big-picture perspective is supported by Comer's work, which also highlights children's need for relationships with caring adults (Comer, 1997, 1998; Lofland, 1995; Ramirez-Smith, 1995; Squires & Kranyik, 1995/1996). The Comer School Development Program involves parents, community, church, and school as major resources for helping young people develop social, psycho-emotional, and intellectual aspects of learning. In retrospect, the Comer program recognizes total development as being critical for a successful school career and lifestyle.

What is the framework of the School Development Program? Initially, the **School Development Team** becomes immersed in the school culture and gains an understanding of the problematic school climate. The team then builds a structure that

helps parents, educators, and specialists to cooperatively organize a comprehensive school plan, which emphasizes students' total development. Working closely with the team are **Parent Program** members who engage in a variety of supportive activities, such as establishing parent centers, coordinating social programs, and encouraging parental involvement in the school. Another important part of the framework is the **School Support Team** (formerly called the Mental Health Team), which focuses on prevention and intervention strategies for improving school conditions so that they are more child-friendly.

As expected, the success of these three governance teams is dependent on staff development. For example, the teams learn such skills as conflict management and team building. In addition, administrators learn to become more effective as instructional leaders, building managers, and facilitators. Finally, parent workshops introduce the Comer program and provide a variety of ways in which parents can become genuinely involved in their children's education (Lofland, 1995). In Comer's (1998) ideal perspective, children are "caught in a seamless web of caring people."

Caring and Literacy Learning

Since today's societal changes have imposed extreme challenges on children and their families, the maxim that it takes a village to rear a child must remain intact. This dominant force undergirding a comprehensive support system is essential for the success of students' total development. Without such support, academic achievement--and more specifically literacy learning--will hardly occur because effective teaching and learning cannot be separated from young people's emotional, social, and experiential backgrounds. Realizing the limitations of a vacuous academic setting provides the key players with insight concerning ways of helping students to achieve school success, in general, and to advance literacy learning, in particular.

What can caring adults do to promote optimal conditions for effective learning? The following suggestions are gleaned from the professional literature and from my experiences as a consultant to schools nationwide. These suggestions are not prescriptive. Rather, they represent a wide variety of possibilities that can be used to improve the relationship of caring adults and children's literacy learning. This relationship is highlighted because it seems to be the most important factor for helping young people rise above their at-risk environment and lead successful lives.

Enhancement Programs. Maeroff (1998a, 1998b) argues that academic initiative is undermined in neighborhoods where such effort receives minimal support. That is why poor students do not realize connections between classroom learning and the rest of their lives. To enhance better connections, Maeroff provides a comprehensive collection of programs and activities that bring caring adults and students together for the purpose of building students' social capital and thus increasing their chances of immediate and future success. One such program links curriculum and instruction to children's schemata (or prior knowledge). At the Ochoa (Arizona) Elementary School, teaching and learning are directly related to students' schemata, home, and community. Acknowledging this relationship as a solid foundation for successful learning has strong potential to improve a positive attitude toward learning and to create a strong bond between school and home. Documentation for this successful bonding is found in Montera's (1996) doctoral dissertation.

Connecting children's learning to their home and community makes sense because both middle-class families (Taylor, 1983) and low-income families (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) provide their children with literacy activities that can be extended to the school. By respecting literacy learning in the home and by extending such learning to the classroom, educators are legitimizing the home/school partnership as a genuine

foundation for success. Meanwhile, greater trust between parents and educators is established, and this trust is likely to result in children's continued success with literacy.

Literacy Corps Program. In 1990, Fitchburg State College was awarded a federal grant, which was used to develop the Literacy Corps Program (Flippo, Hetzel, Gribouski, & Armstrong, 1997). The primary goal of the program is to support successful literacy opportunities for local children, adolescents, and adults. This population of learners includes Native Americans, whites, Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and Pakistanis.

Undergraduate students who wish to become tutors enroll in an elective course entitled Literacy Corps and meet one evening a week. The instructor engages the students in required readings and pertinent discussions, which help to build sensitivity and awareness concerning important issues in literacy education. Among the issues are bilingualism and its influence on literacy development, use of varied English dialects, reading instruction strategies for newly literate adults, related literacy assessment, and connections between literacy and social and economic development.

The community agencies and schools involved with the Literacy Corps Program select individuals who need tutorial services to improve their literacy development. The tutors then administer informal assessments to obtain information about the tutees' current performance, reading behaviors, interests and goals, feelings concerning reading and writing, and currently available resources. Afterward, the tutors, the tutees, and the classroom teachers (or site managers) analyze information generated from the assessments and develop an effective study plan.

During the tutorial sessions, the tutors demonstrate genuine caring as they provide a variety of services, such as helping tutees with instructional strategies, supplying them with pertinent resources, monitoring their progress, and, most important, giving them

much encouragement and moral support. Since literacy learners are culturally and individually unique, they construct meaning differently. Thus, the Literacy Corps Program considers multicultural and sociocultural awareness to be critical for conducting effective tutorial sessions. These considerations help "the pairs work as teams to allow tutees to travel along personal paths of literacy development" (p.645).

Complementing these efforts are other supportive approaches to making the Literacy Corps Program a success. For example, the tutors demonstrate a commitment to working intensively and cooperatively with classroom teachers or site managers in responding to the needs of the tutees. Furthermore, parents and families are asked to assess the tutees' progress with an attitudinal scale at the end of the semester. Finally, during the weekly class meetings, tutors have opportunities to share valuable insights they have gained from the tutoring sessions; they also are encouraged to write about these insights in their journals.

This overall commitment has led to positive program outcomes, which were observed and documented while focusing on the tutees' progress and reviewing the tutors' journals. These outcomes include elementary school children improving their attitudes about writing and reading; adults making substantial progress toward completing their General Education Development (GED) diplomas; tutees demonstrating more confidence when pursuing literacy-learning tasks; tutors increasing their understanding of themselves, the community, and the forces that affect the tutees' lives and education; and tutors realizing that literacy is connected to culture and is inseparable from the tutees' environment.

In retrospect, Flippo, Hetzel, Gribouski, and Armstrong (1997, p. 646) believe

> The Literacy Corps at Fitchburg state College is a powerful example of the possibilities promoted through a college/school/community partnership. The sense of personal pride in one's academic accomplishments, the sense of purpose in

helping others achieve their goals, the insights into other lives, the growth in awareness and appreciation of cultural differences, and the valuable friendships forged through the semester of learning allow both tutees and tutors to grow as individuals.

***Parent-Child Learning Project*.** Another approach to building literacy bridges for schools and communities is supported by Gadsden's (1995) research, which involved workshops for Latino and African American families whose children attended the United States Head Start program. Referred to as the Parent-Child Learning Project (PCLP), Gadsden and her research team focused on understanding how families construct and use literacy and what these literacy needs are. The parents and research team met for 16 weekly workshop sessions that ranged between 2 and 3 hours, and the sessions highlighted parenting and literacy concerns. Specifically, parents engaged in discussions concerning the purposes of literacy, questions and issues related to literacy in their families, and descriptions of literacy activities. Discussion topics, generated by parents and the professional literature, became a major support system. Parents learned to help their children with emergent literacy activities, to develop their own communication skills, and to identify municipal resources. Parents also became immersed in weekly written assignments, which were compiled in a newsletter and workbook and then were distributed to all participants in Head Start, including those not involved with the PCLP. Participants who wanted and needed more literacy support were individually tutored or were referred to adult or family literacy programs.

Besides the workshop setting, the research team visited a representative group of parents in their homes and conducted in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews. A family household protocol instrument was used to determine the literacy interests and behaviors of the parents and their children, the literacy attitudes of the parents, and the

beliefs and expectations that parents had about literacy (especially connections between literacy and potential changes in their lives and their children's lives).

In all aspects of the PCLP, parents and Head Start staff were significantly involved with the decision-making process, including the identification of important parental concerns and the selection of program priorities. This process demonstrated respect for the rich knowledge that parents possess and simultaneously provided the research team with valuable information for connecting the program to the lives of the participants. Interestingly, supportive research suggests that a program tends to be more effective and its outcomes to be more durable when the participants being helped by the program are a genuine part of related decision-making (Epstein, 1992).

Gadsden and her research team also reviewed PCLP data to determine parents' awareness of their children's literacy development. From a wealth of information provided by field notes and interview responses, a number of perspectives emerged: literacy as a social process, literacy as parent empowerment, literacy as racial experience, and literacy as life necessity. In addition, a variety of issues emerged, including literacy activities at home, literacy learning in school, use of instructional materials, and functional use of literacy. Although parents were committed to supporting their children's reading and writing efforts, they also were seeking a forum with teachers and administrators to counterbalance potential problems that their children might confront. Overall, parents had positive perceptions of the program because they felt the caring staff worked diligently to assist them and to integrate important issues concerning their families' cultures. As expected, parents demonstrated comfort and trust as they became genuine collaborators in developing literacy programs for their families.

Talk to a Literacy Learner. Building parent/school partnerships to promote children's

literacy development is the focus of Talk to a Literacy Learner (TTALL). Initially, the program was developed for the Lethbridge Park Primary and the Lethbridge Park Preschool (Cairney & Munsie, 1995). TTALL is supported operationally by a large team of parents, teachers, and school executive of the primary school and preschool. Located in the western suburbs of Sydney, Australia, families are surrounded by the typical problems of a high-density urban environment, including high rates of marital divorce, unemployment, vandalism, drug addiction, and minimal participation in the schools.

In the first stage of the TTALL program, all parents are invited to join and to be active learners and participants so that they can respond effectively to their own children's needs. Those who accept the invitation become involved in 2-hour sessions, conducted twice a week for 8 weeks. Each session includes such basic components as story reading, leader input, demonstration, discussion and reflection, and homework. The content of the program is structured by 7 topics: (1) learning (e.g., highlighting children's self-esteem and its connection to learning), (2) the reading process (e.g., exploring readers' use of the semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic cuing systems), (3) supporting the reader (e.g., introducing the Directed Reading/Thinking Strategy, Paired Reading, and other reading experiences that sustain reading development), (4) using the library (e.g., discussing children's authors and motivating participants to experience the joy of reading children's books), (5) the writing process (e.g., examining children's writing development), (6) supporting the writer (e.g., explaining the relationship of writing, reading, and spelling), and (7) research writing (e.g., helping participants, with their children, to prepare research topics).

Stages 2 and 3 of the TTALL program are designed to help parents become resources for the school and community. Stage 2 involves 8 sessions, each lasting 2 hours, during which parents engage in classroom work with children other than their

own. Practical experiences and observations support parents' efforts to be effective resources. Stage 3 consists of another 5 or 6 weeks and provides the participants with the necessary skills for sharing insights they gained from the program with other parents. Specifically, the participants focus on the Community Tutors Kit, which highlights modules to be used with preschool to grade 6 children. Among the modules are Supporting the Reader and Writer, Books to Share, and Learning through Play. Then, the participants meet with other parents in their homes and share related insights.

The success of the TTALL program has been documented qualitatively and quantitatively through pre- and post-tests of students whose parents participated in the the project; interviews with parents, students, and school staff; videotaping of parents during different stages of the project; field notes; and reflective journals (Cairney & Munsie, 1992a, 1992b, 1995). Major findings include: the TTALL program has significantly affected the ways in which parents interact with their children; the program has provided parents with strategies that they were unaware of previously; the program has helped parents to gain new knowledge; entire families and their lifestyles have been affected positively; parents have shared their insights with other family members, friends, and neighbors; parents have developed greater awareness of how schools operate; parents have demonstrated growth in their confidence and self-esteem; and children's writing and reading have improved significantly. Indeed, the TTALL program has created strong, caring partnerships that have improved the key players' lives in lasting ways.

Literacy Learning for Homeless Students. Probably, homeless children and their families represent the most at-risk group of learners. Of the more than 1 million U.S. children who are homeless, more than 750,000 are old enough to attend school,

and the vast majority achieves significantly below their peers (Nunez, 1996; Nunez & Collignon, 1997). Unsuccessful performance is linked to low attendance rates caused by hunger, health problems, difficulty securing clothes and supplies for school, and transportation obstacles . These and other factors--e.g., problems at the homeless shelters, frequent mobility, and schools that inhibit progress--present formidable challenges for homeless students and their teachers (Rafferty, 1997/1998; Rafferty & Rollins, 1989).

A major step toward eliminating, or lessening, the negative impact of poverty and homelessness is to create communities of learning (Nunez & Collignon, 1997). These school- or shelter-based communities combine the schools' educational expertise and the shelters' experiences and services for the purpose of providing children and their parents with an educational environment and with basic care. Communities of learning include such components as specialized (instead of special) education for homeless children, adult education that is sensitive to the context of parents' lives, and services that are connected to the needs of families. These considerations demonstrate a genuinely caring attitude rather than a condescending manner when reaching out to this extremely needy population.

Since this population is homeless, not helpless, communities of learning and other related initiatives recognize that love is not enough when responding to the needs of the homeless. After a sense of caring and trust has been established among the key players--homeless families, shelter staff, and school staff--a foundation is now set for helping the homeless connect positively with literacy learning. Focusing on literacy is essential because at-risk, mobile students must develop better communication and problem-solving strategies to grow beyond their current status of homelessness.

Staff members who engage in pertinent staff development can gain important insights about helping the homeless become independent and successful. A variety of

workshop activities should be considered, such as (Sanacore, 1995):

- Create courses divided into segments as well as minicourses so that homeless children have flexible curriculum offerings. These courses provide mobile learners with partial credit that can be transferred to other schools (Vissing, Schroepfer, & Bloise, 1994). Thus, the language arts curriculum might be organized around four annual themes, with each theme being comparable to a course segment or minicourse. Upon successfully completing related assignments, homeless children are granted 1/4 credit.
- Develop student assignments for course segments and minicourses to accommodate those who are unable to attend school regularly. Workshop participants should provide options that enable individuals and small groups to complete projects concerning curricular themes. Options might include (1) in language arts, creating a story, play, or collection of poems related to belonging and alienation; and in social studies, becoming immersed in a painting, drawing, audiotape, videotape, dance, drama, or another medium while responding to the question, "Is war ever justified?"
- Select strategies that children can learn immediately and use independently. PLAE (Preplanning, Listing, Activating, Evaluating), ERRQ (Estimate, Read, Respond, Question), and SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite/Reflect, Review) represent a sampling of the strategies that are easily applied across the curriculum. Those participating in staff development need to support and create a variety of approaches for helping homeless children not only respond interactively to different content area resources but also develop better control of the learning process.
- Plan congruent activities for homeless children so that cohesive, meaningful learning is reinforced in the school and shelter. Curricular congruence involves comparable goals, strategies, skills, and resources being highlighted in both settings. When staff and student volunteers as well as administrators and coordinators are invited to the workshop sessions, the chances of successful congruence are increased.

- Develop a policy for portfolio use. Since homeless children are mobile, they usually live in different shelters and attend different schools. This mobility causes major disruptions in their learning and simultaneously impedes continuity of instruction. Compounding these problems are the previously attended schools that move at a snail's pace when sending records to the newly attended schools. Some of these difficulties are resolved through students' portfolios, which represent specific outcomes and accomplishments. Portfolios also provide opportunities for determining the range, depth, and growth of learning and for helping children get in touch with their feelings concerning their learning (Graves & Sunstein, 1992). An important activity for the workshop participants is to establish a policy that concerns the types of artifacts that are included in the portfolios and the rights of homeless children to take **their** portfolios to new schools and shelters. A policy of this type nurtures a sense of instructional continuity and prevents unnecessary literacy gaps from widening.

Although these staff development efforts are beneficial to homeless children, parental involvement increases the children's chances of success with literacy learning. Regrettably, homeless parents are difficult to reach because they may have a deep distrust of educational bureaucracies, probably the result of their own negative experiences with schools when they were children. As caring educators, we must persevere in our efforts to motivate homeless parents to become genuine partners in their children's education. Working cooperatively with the directors of the temporary shelters, we should organize workshops for parents that focus on their children's social, emotional, and intellectual needs. Among the ways of encouraging parental attendance at the workshops are sending warm invitations to parents, following up with "down-to-earth" presentations, offering warm meals and refreshments, providing flexible schedules for attendance, and supplyng transportation. Positive conditions are now set for productive workshop sessions, during which the staff and student volunteers,

principal and coordinators, shelter director, guest speakers, and parents share valuable insights. Although no magic formula or panacea exists, the sessions should focus on pertinent activities that are potentially supportive of homeless parents and their children. The following suggestions deserve consideration (Sanacore, 1995):

- Provide an orientation that demonstrates profound caring (without condescension) for homeless children and reactivates parents' role as vital members of the learning community. Included in this orientation is a discussion of the 1987 Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, with its 1990 and 1994 amendments. The overall intent of this law is to help the homeless, and its educational purpose is to give homeless students equal access to public education. Discussing the McKinney Act reminds all the key players that the schools' involvement is not an act of charity but rather a serious response to the learning needs of the children.
- Describe the instructional program, including the partial-credit system, curricular themes, important projects, portfolio use, tutorial services, and other support systems that help homeless children "catch up" with their peers.
- Focus on the importance of students becoming lifetime learners so that parents develop hope for the future through the empowering effects of authentic literature. Here, literature includes newspapers, magazines, how-to manuals, career pamphlets, recipe books, trade books, audiobooks, computer software, and other resources (Sanacore, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, in preparation; Sanacore & Wilsusen, 1995). Since these materials are not readily accessible to homeless families, the building principal could survey the parents and their children to determine their interests, needs, and wishes. Then, materials connected to the results of the survey could be secured through the school library, public library, and community book drive. These materials are more likely to be selected and read when they are attractively displayed in the students' shelter library and classroom library. Another concern that should be

highlighted is the need to provide time for becoming immersed in reading in both shelter and classroom settings, along with parents and teachers serving as literacy role models. Parents who are uncomfortable with reading or illiterate may be matched with sensitive volunteer tutors.

- Invite representatives of potentially supportive groups to increase homeless parents' awareness of available services. These local community organizations and agencies include Department of Labor (employment/training), Department of Health Services, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Mental Health Association, Medical Emergency, U.S. Marshals Service, Social Services, Social Security, Youth Bureau, Catholic Charities, Jewish Community Services, Brighter Tomorrows (domestic violence), Child Abuse Prevention Information Resources Center, Crisis Intervention Services, Cooperative Library System, Legal Information Tel-Law, and Parent-Teacher-Student Association. After the presentations, parents benefit from receiving related materials as well as the names and telephone numbers of contact persons.

Connecting Literacy Learning to Caring Relationships Is Vital

Today's demographic trends have imposed major stresses on children and their families. Specifically, less parenting is occurring, and this basic phenomenon in our society is placing children at greater risk of succumbing to the negtive influences in the social environment. Exacerbating this problematic context are the national standards and assessment initiatives, which are dominating the culture of American politicians, state education departments, school systems, and the media. These powerful forces believe that children can achieve in literacy by simply raising standards and holding schools accountable. Regrettably, this naive perspective is distracting families and schools from critical issues concerning the emotional and social worlds of children and their connections to success in literacy learning.

For these connections to be effective, however, educators must reach out to large numbers of at-risk children and their families and embrace them as equal partners in their education. Demonstrating genuine love and caring and building substantial trust help the key players develop a sense of community that deliberately and consistently works toward creating conditions for successful learning. Within the scope and space limitations of this article, five suggestions are highlighted for improving relationships between caring adults and children's literacy learning. Enhancement programs, the Literacy Corps Program, the Parent-Child Learning Project, the Talk-to-a-Literacy-Learner program, and efforts to support the education of homeless families are only a sampling of innovative approaches from which caring people can draw and adapt to their local environments. Of course, these efforts represent no easy fix for the deep-rooted problems that prevent many at-risk families from achieving the same goals as more advantaged families. Although real commitment to improving the overall culture of communities takes time, it also provides all the key players with humanistic and substantive benefits that will last a lifetime.

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